Decolonization and the Left

Andrew Heartfield, Ralph Leonard, and Andrew Sanchez

On June 2, 2023, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel on decolonization and the Left at Cambridge University. The speakers were James Heartfield (former member of the Revolutionary Communist Party (UK), author of The Aborigines' Protection Society *and* Britain's Empires[1]*), Ralph Leonard (writer at unHerd), and Andrew Sanchez (Professor of Social Anthropology at Cambridge, author of* Criminal Capital[2]*). The panel was moderated by Platypus member Victor Cova. An edited transcript follows.*[3]

Introduction

Over the past few years and particularly since the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, decolonization has appeared as a federating catchword for radical politics in Britain and elsewhere. It appears to encompass a wide array of phenomena, forms of activism, and demands, and varies considerably in different geographical contexts, making it difficult to define. Yet to demand decolonization today necessarily points to the legacy of the drastic failures and limitations of decolonization in different historical moments: post-WWII struggles for national self-determination, Wilsonianism, the Bolivarian revolutions, and, perhaps above all, the American Revolution itself. To call for decolonization, rather than for the more traditionally Leftist slogans of anti-imperialism, national self-determination, and antiracism, also means questioning the Left's — and Marxism's — own relation to liberalism.

What is decolonization for the Left today? What are its aims, and how can they be achieved today? How and why were previous phases of decolonization a failure or incomplete? What would it take to complete it? What tasks have we inherited from those failures? What potential exists today for fulfilling these tasks? How can the contemporary decolonization movement help achieve this? How does decolonization relate to the task of socialism, if at all? How does it relate to other ideas such as "anti-imperialism" or "anti-racism"? What bearing does the contemporary #Decolonize movement offer on previous forms of radical politics, and how might these earlier struggles judge the present?

Opening remarks

Andrew Sanchez: The decolonization projects of the mid-20th century are incomplete political projects. They are incomplete because they did not substantively and effectively dismantle economic, political, and intellectual structures. In academic jargon, the hangover of those structures is "coloniality."

Most postcolonial states introduce policies of economic protectionism precisely to safeguard against postcolonial recursion. But the effectiveness of these policies was sporadic, and the majority of the most substantial protection projects were dismantled in the 1990s.

In terms of political life, decolonization also did not dismantle the internal hierarchies, inequalities, and structures of colonial societies. Generally, the ruling elites of most postcolonial societies tend to be disproportionately composed of classes or ethnic groups that systematically benefited from or aided colonialism.

Intellectually, despite vibrant traditions of cultural nationalism and radical thought, values and ideas of colonial powers still disproportionately determine how people in postcolonial states think. They determine what matters and what is valued. We can see that clearly in political institutions through the ubiquity of Westminster party and parliamentary systems, through the ways in which laws are codified, and through the structures of education from primary to higher education. These intellectual questions are important right now because the current decolonization route is fundamentally a struggle for rights, voice, and representation, which means it is a struggle about people's abilities to reinterpret things and so to redefine political and economic priorities.

I'm concerned with a tendency in some quarters of the far Left to dismiss identity politics as unreal. The assumption that identity politics is unreal because it doesn't relate to things that are material or economic is a claim made from a position of privilege. Your identity might be your real politics. Your identity might determine whether you are secure, whether you are listened to, and whether you have the ability to impact the world around you. I understand the current decolonization movement as a struggle for rights and the ability to imagine new political possibilities.

I first became involved in the Left when I was about 15, when I joined the Socialist Workers Party (UK) (SWP). I was attracted to it because I was a working-class boy who grew up in a mixed-race household. Some people in my family are from the Caribbean, and some are from Roma gypsies. Coming from that background, I assumed the Left was an organized struggle for social justice. To me it was clear that any of those struggles would necessarily be about economy and class, but also about race and empire, gender and sexualities.

In the SWP, the first thing that I learned was tactics. They taught us how to organize and participate in demonstrations, how to run petitions nobody will ever read, and how to sell copies of the *Socialist Worker*. I also learned about the history of radical collective struggles in meetings just like this panel. Those meetings about radical history had a particular repertoire. You were supposed to know about the Paris Commune, the late 1960s student revolts, the general strikes, etc.

Now that I think about that experience of becoming a Leftist, it was problematic in a way that I couldn't have anticipated at the time. Revolutionary socialism is supposed to be the politics of the future when it is nonetheless a political project that has a tendency to fetishize the struggles of the past. That's a sweeping statement, and I know not all forms of Left politics do that. In the late 2000s, the Occupy movement, the resurgence of popular anarchism, was thinking about new ways of doing demos.

As an anthropologist, I have an idea about why the Left needs a repertoire like this. It needs a repertoire of dramatic and heroic struggles because, frankly, being involved in the Left is a daily slog of struggle where you don't get to win very often. Having heroes and villains gives us a sense of engaging in a historically continuous global struggle where we are not only right, but we also sometimes win.

The Left has been overtaken by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #MeToo because these movements define new forms and styles of struggle and are markedly more effective. What the Left can learn from decolonization is a willingness to be more creative and less bound by tactics and ideas of the past, which is to say becoming progressive.

In terms of what decolonization can learn from the Left — reforming things like statues, names, and symbols establishes the conditions that allow people to shift their perspectives on power and value, but that attention to the symbols is only worthwhile if followed by substantive change to how societies are organized. If it ends at the symbols, it is incomplete.

The current decolonization movement should pay more attention to the distinctions between the positions of different postcolonial subjects, i.e., it should think about class and power. For example, if you come from certain elite West African communities with control of the political, economic, and intellectual life of your state, you should consider whether that community has that control because it's the type of community that profited from the slave trade. Those positions of power are themselves expressions of coloniality. The current decolonization movement needs to not only know and recognize these things; it has to have a commitment to dismantle them.

Finally, the decolonization movement needs to understand the neocolonial terms of its own projects. In particular, global projects are overwhelmingly (but not exclusively) composed of North American reference points. For example, BLM has sparked a global reckoning for questions of racial power, but it raises the question of why it sparked the fire. The global Left could have been inspired to a reckoning with race at any point by being collectively outraged by things like caste injustice in India, which involves hundreds of millions of people, or by the fact that gypsies across Europe have been enslaved, murdered, terrorized, and imprisoned for hundreds of years, but they weren't outraged, and they didn't care.

The uncomfortable fact is that these issues were of great interest to the people they directly affected and the specialists that studied them, but other people didn't care enough to be motivated by them in a way that BLM did. Decolonization and the Left have to start confronting the fact that U.S. issues and politics have the capacity to become global issues. That's a contradiction because the West, among other places, is a de facto neocolonial power. It has an undue level of power and authority, even through the exercise of violence, over other nations' ways of thought, their economy, and their politics.

James Heartfield: I want to use the word "colonialism" in a more prosaic, obvious way. I'm familiar with the arguments about neocolonialism, but colonialism is a historically bounded event. Colonialism is over in the strict meaning of the word. If you extend the meaning of the word, you should know that you are doing so.

What we're talking about, speaking as a historian, is the European empires, which shared most of the world in two ways, one around the 1600s to 1700s, the other around 1880 to 1945. These have pointedly been dismantled in the period from 1912 to the end of the WWII, picking up a particular pace in the 1960s, dribbling on in the British case with the colony of the six counties of Northern Ireland. Even then I'm not sure you can speak of the six counties of Northern Ireland as colonies after the Good Friday Agreement (1998) and after the referendum on the 26 counties in Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of Ireland,[4] in the sense that there isn't a national claim in the contest for power. We have mixed authority. Britain's incapable of governing Northern Ireland; that's why they incorporate the South and the European Union. The South doesn't really want the six counties, which is what Articles 2 and 3 mean. Sinn Féin is the biggest party, which is fascinating, but what it isn't, which you can see from the decrease in violence following the Good Friday Agreement, is an anti-colonial struggle.

This anti-colonial struggle within the borders of the United Kingdom is what had electrified me in politics and what got me writing. Kwame Nkrumah's book on neocolonialism[5] makes an excellent point: seek first the political kingdom, free yourself politically, and take political authority in your country from the imperialists. If they still control you through the economy, you are not really free.

Issue 184 | March 2026

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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

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The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

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Ghosts of Eurocentrism past

A review of *Decolonizing Economics*

Anirban Karak

Devika Dutt, Carolina Alves, Surbhi Kesar, and Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven, *Decolonizing Economics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2025).

DECOLONIZATION HAS become "chic" and a "buzzword." The book under review is part of a series titled "Decolonizing the Curriculum," which includes critiques of politics, geography, anthropology, sociology, and literature. The authors of our volume consciously distance themselves from "fake" decolonization and "co-optation" into the status quo. Yet, their arguments exemplify tendencies that have contributed to the Left's current helplessness. The book offers little beyond a synthesis of writings fashionable within the "academic" Left, and there are significant omissions in a text that seeks to open debate rather than foreclosing it. I shall argue that these follow from a one-sided view of modern history and its contradictions.

There are reasons to take the book seriously. It treats mainstream economics as ideology, and it proceeds from the conviction that ideology shapes how we interpret and act in the world. Thus, a critique of ideology is a precondition for transformative politics. Any such critique, though, requires self-reflexivity about its own historical conditions of possibility — an element entirely absent here. Rather, decolonization in this text is a light from nowhere that is bestowed upon the less fortunate by the authors.[1]

The key argument of the book is that everything — quite literally — that is wrong with economics follows from its "Eurocentrism," which is defined as "a view of the world that positions a partial and mythical experience of the development of capitalism in Western European [sic] as central, interpreting all other phenomena only in relation to it" (16). The considerable, perhaps insurmountable, difficulties involved in positing a unified history of "Europe" (or even "Western Europe") — and the erasure of politics and contingency within Europe that this entails — are summarily ignored.[2]

No matter. The authors argue that economists think this way, and that is what turns economics into ideology. This too, is debatable. For instance, is Eurocentrism really what makes some heterodox economists neglect processes of social differentiation beyond class, as the authors claim (119)? Alternative defenses of arguments that the authors disagree with are glossed over, for everything must somehow be tied back to Eurocentrism. Beliefs are implicitly imputed to interlocutors, giving an ad hominem flavor to the critiques articulated in the book, despite protestations to the contrary (161).[3] Ideology critique, rather, must explain how historical contexts and their contradictions give force to certain arguments, and thereby account for its own conditions of possibility.

The definition of Eurocentrism must be probed further. What does it mean to interpret "all phenomena" "in relation" to the development of capitalism in Western Europe? The book does discuss one mode of thought for which this makes sense, i.e., modernization theory, or the view that capitalism will evolve "everywhere" in the same manner (16–17). The implicit assumption in such a claim, of course, is that the world is made up of distinct nation-states, for the spatial coordinates of "everywhere" must be further specified for the theory to make sense. Modernization theory — and, one may add, Stalinism — posits that each nation must pass through a pre-determined schema drawn from the historical experience of parts of Western Europe: primitive accumulation, industrialization, and so on.

This is true, but these ideas themselves emerged historically during the 19th century (via proponents of national political economy such as Friedrich List), and were consolidated in the 20th, in large part because of the failures of socialist (and preceding that, liberal) internationalism (read universalism). The authors, instead, superimpose such ideas onto the whole of modernity and political-economic thinking, including Adam Smith. The book thus occludes from view the alternative visions of global society whose defeats were contingent, and it further cements the historical amnesia that plagues the Left today.

This is clearest in the discussions of Smith and Marx. That Smith thought of the world as "comprising numerous equal and independent nations" (41) is surprising, since the context that he wrote about was constituted primarily by "empires." Moreover, the character of the British empire in particular was up for grabs until the 1780s at least.4 Smith did think of the "relation" between Europe and the wider world, but he was adamant that the rise of bourgeois society in Western Europe was a result of "poor" Europe trading with "richer" parts of the world (especially Asia).[5] The "unnatural" progress of opulence in Europe was a function of historical context, not of any innate economic, let alone cultural, superiority.[6] Indeed, Smith could not have made such an argument, because there was nothing in his experience that could have suggested such a conclusion. To accuse him of Eurocentrism — and, implicitly, of racism — is profoundly misleading.

Nevertheless, Smith also expressed a sense of historical *necessity*. The rise of bourgeois society in Western Europe and global commerce from the 16th century onwards had made it possible, for the first time in human history, to universalize "natural liberty." The brutality of European empires in the Americas, and the monopolization of Asian trade was, for Smith, a betrayal of such promises.7 His criticisms of the extractive rule of the British East India Company in India are nearly forgotten today, and the book under review is no exception. In fact, Smith supported the radical bourgeois faction of the company that sought to re-establish the Mughal empire along commercial lines.[8] There is also evidence to suggest that actors within Indian society found reason to support such endeavors.[9] A bourgeois revolution, in other words, was once a genuine possibility in India, and its contingent failure must be explained historically, as a function of politics in both colony and metropole.

By Smith's standards, then, the modern, interconnected, global world that emerged was a *failure*. Recognizing the simple fact that historical actors themselves viewed extractive imperialism as violent and illiberal obviates the need to find Eurocentrism everywhere, a concept that acquires near-theological status in the book akin to "original sin." The superficial reading of Smith also has implications for how the question of "structural power" is addressed. The authors insist that economics today does not deal with questions of power, which is true. Yet, there is no systematic discussion of the nature of power in different social forms, or of how historical actors had sought to realize liberty. Smith, of course, was concerned with the liberty that is natural to the human species, and he had no Eurocentric assumptions about "who" is capable (or desirous) of achieving it. Commercial society, for Smith, offered a way to limit state power, because order could now emerge *through* rather than at the cost of individual liberty. Hence his emphasis on self-interest, which had been submerged under the need for collective order in previous social forms. By not engaging with this central tenet of liberalism, the book downplays the *stakes* involved in the continued existence of an associational sphere — civil, commercial, or bourgeois society — that is not reducible to the state. The failures of liberalism need to be explained historically. "Eurocentrism" will not cut it.

This brings us to Marx, who is curiously exempted from the charges of Eurocentrism levelled against Smith. The authors surely know that within academic social science, Marx is often treated as one more iteration of a now-finally-defeated Enlightenment universalism. Edward Said, who is repeatedly invoked, was a pioneer of this tendency, and he detected not just Eurocentrism but implicit racism in Marx's diatribe against pre-colonial Indian society.[10] Like Smith, though, Marx had no truck with pre-modern societies *anywhere*, and his denunciations of India are no more strident than his criticisms of Europe's own feudal past, of Bonapartism, or of non-revolutionary German burghers.[11] And, like Smith again, Marx had only good things to say about the bourgeois revolutions in England and France, in which the victory of the bourgeoisie was "the *victory of a new social order* . . . of nationality over provincialism, of competition over the guild . . . of enlightenment over superstition, of the family over the family name, of industry over heroic laziness, of civil law over privileges of medieval origin."[12]

Of course, Marx was hasty to conclude that the British colonial state, despite being motivated by the "vilest interests," had brought about a social revolution in India.[13] Colonialism yielded a retrograde resolution to the crisis of Indian society, but Marx's support for national liberation was conditional. It would mean nothing without a social revolution that abolished caste and a proletarian revolution in the metropole. Marx's basis for arriving at such conclusions, as well as the basis for judging the adequacy of a political program, was decidedly modernist: the possibility of universal human emancipation — the destiny of mankind as he called it — which was impossible without a social revolution in Asia. Bourgeois society, Marx thought, had come to contradict its own stated aims in the form of capital. The crisis of liberalism was a function of its own past failures, which Smith had begun to witness. Future possibilities, though, were also generated by capital, and not by remnants of the pre-capitalist past. Socialism, then, would involve the fulfillment of bourgeois promises and not their negation.

One may disagree with Marx, but the authors constantly invoke him without clarifying where they stand regarding Marx's indisputable modernism and sense of historical necessity. Often, Marx is portrayed as a theorist of class "processes" as such, with no further historical specification (179–80, passim). The historical Marx appears only in connection with discussions of primitive accumulation, which plays a critical role in the narrative of the book. Indeed, the authors suggest that a focus on original accumulation is key to transcending the Eurocentrism of Smithian economics. Yet again, though, closer examination reveals only contradictions and unresolved aporias.

The book argues that primitive accumulation, slavery, and imperialism reveal that the rise of capitalism was underpinned by violence and expropriation (16–17, 45–49, passim). Foregrounding this is the way out of Eurocentrism because it sheds light on the *global* character of capitalism from the beginning, which had primarily negative consequences for much of the world beyond the North Atlantic (and, presumably, for many within that region). This is again a one-sided formulation, for it completely ignores the fact that bourgeois and liberal critiques of these phenomena were constantly articulated *by* historical actors of the time, including Smith. Moreover, through his emphasis on the "double freedom" of wage labor, Marx sought to convey the difficult idea that an irretrievable loss may simultaneously herald the promise of a better future. Despite his florid descriptions of coercive primitive accumulation in Britain, nothing suggests that Marx's aim was to invoke moral sympathy for the sufferer. If anything, he recognized that the sufferer in this story was "at once decent and flawed."[14] The real question, then, is why doubly-free wage labor did not become the norm everywhere, which the authors neither broach nor address.

The emphasis on the coercive force of imperialism as the basis for global capitalist expansion also reproduces a diffusionist story where "Europe" must be treated as always fully constituted and as ontologically incapable of developing true knowledge about or different relationships with the rest of the world. In short, what happened was always destined to happen. If this is not a form of determinist teleology, I do not know what is.

The big unresolved question in the book, therefore, is what meaning categories such as "capitalism" and "bourgeois society" can have for writing histories of "non-Europe." The diffusionist, violence-centered story suggests that capitalism is *merely* a negative development in the history of the species-being, and that it is civilizationally external to "non-Europe." Hence the claim that although sophisticated economic thinking in pre-modern Asia may have influenced modern political economy, non-Europe offers us "alternatives" to the Smithian emphasis on "self-interest" (50–51). The work of self-consciously "post-colonial" economists is also marshalled to argue that "unlike the European experience," primitive accumulation remains "ever-incomplete in post-colonial economies" (173).

Why does this not count as Eurocentrism? Claiming that post-colonial transformation is "incomplete" presumes a modular form of transition that repeats itself at the scale of each nation-state. Why, then, is this not an instance of the "methodological nationalism" of modernization theory that the authors criticize (24, 71, passim)? Here, as elsewhere, the book offers no answers.

That the trajectory of capitalism is different everywhere is a truism. Capitalism in India was able to capitalize on and reproduce caste hierarchies because a bourgeois revolution never materialized. Hence, India can be simultaneously pre-bourgeois and post-bourgeois with a deadly mix of the worst of both worlds, a point that Marx had already made about Germany in the 1840s.[15] This does not mean, however, that the reproduction of everyday life in India is not dependent on and mediated by the totality of global social capital. Indeed, the increasing impossibility of universalizing wage labor in the so-called "developing" world can only be explained with reference to the contemporary dynamics of capital and the nature of surplus populations on a planetary scale.[16]

These unresolved tensions culminate in a lack of clarity about the standpoint of critique and the potential bases or sources of transformation. If it is true that capitalism is civilizationally external to non-Europe, then does that imply an uncritical affirmation of pre-modern societies there? What could be the basis for passing a judgment either way if the modernity of bourgeois promises and the notion of historical necessity are rejected?

The authors are aware of these dilemmas, but they take no firm stand. They distance themselves from nationalism and the Right-wing obscurantism that the "decolonizing" agenda is clearly in sync with (24, 26–27).[17] They also insist that they are not against economic growth, industrialization, or modernity *per se* (103). But these are empty gestures given that they also reject the notion of historical necessity, suggesting instead that "cultures" that deviate from a "Eurocentric" norm may be compatible with general human emancipation, *and* that they must be judged "on their own terms" (148–49). Their protestations to the contrary notwithstanding (132–35), this sounds worryingly relativist and ad hoc. To a critical modernist such as Marx, the basis for judgment was always modern. This does not imply that pre-modern cultures offer nothing worth preserving that is potentially compatible with universal freedom. But it *does* mean that at the level of *society* on a global scale, there is no going back. "Culture" and "society" cannot be conflated, and the only way to preserve aspects of pre-modern cultures that are meaningful to us is to develop an anti-capitalist political program, which is grounded in more comprehensive historical memories than what the authors offer.

A lack of self-reflexivity is palpable throughout the book. Complaints against "co-optation" of the decolonization agenda abound (x, 26–27), and everything that the authors dislike is labelled "fake" decolonization (213). Not a moment is spared to consider the possibility that co-optation is a result of the constitutive limits of decolonization itself. The book remains unflinchingly and fundamentally nationalist and statist throughout, not least because of its reliance on dependency theory for the analysis of international political-economic relations. The inherent nationalism — both analytical and political — of *dependencia*, the historical failures of import substitution industrialization in the Third World, and the fact that these frameworks are indebted to forms of 19th-century thought (such as List's system of national political economy) that Marx had nothing but disdain for, are not acknowledged.

There are, of course, geopolitical imbalances in the world order. Yet, to posit that some states — usually the United States or the "West" — are somehow the only ones free from the constraints and contradictions of global capitalist dynamics, is to confuse form and content. Capitalist social relations are global in content, and nation-states are the differentiated forms through which the social unity of capital is established on a world scale. Political contestation affects the character of these forms at any given moment, but conflict is still *internal* to the reproduction of capitalist relations and constrained by the imperatives of valorization. There is a substantial literature that criticizes *dependencia* along such lines, some of it produced by scholars *from* and working *in* the "periphery."[18] Why the book ignores them is unclear.

The obsession with finding Eurocentrism everywhere also makes the authors bad readers. For instance, Guy Standing's book The *Precariat* is dismissed off hand as "reek[ing]" of "Eurocentrism" because it fails to account for the specificity of capitalism outside the "center" (177).[19] Even the recognition that the nature of work is changing everywhere and that permanent wage labor is now unattainable for many in the capitalist center as well, does not temper the authors' judgment. Whatever its limits, Standing's work is an attempt to grasp the present as historically constituted. More importantly, whatever his intentions, Standing's empirical descriptions of the "new dangerous class" can be the basis for thinking through how revolutionary subjectivity might emerge from within the dynamics of capital that engenders the precariat on a global scale.[20] *Decolonizing Economics* elides the problem of revolutionary subjectivity, addressing it only in passing with the familiar add-on approach of "intersectionality" (131, 154–55, 161). This does not solve the problem, however, for the authors agree that even a marginalized person (by their standards) may be "Eurocentric" (26–27). Such avant-gardism is ill-suited to the demands of self-reflexive critique, and how it plans to be engaged with "real struggles" (213) is anyone's guess.

Mired in particularism, nationalism, and statism as they are, the authors' brief sojourn into the world of universalism feels like an afterthought (132–35). Capitalism is now described as a "global" system and not just a "Western" one (133). In what sense, though? If the expansion of capitalism is merely a function of imperialism and violence, then surely its "global" character can only be judged in negative terms. The Haitian Revolution is brought up, the point being that Haitians used the French Revolution's language of universal freedom to expose the hypocrisy of the French Empire (134). Point taken — but why did this occur? Critiques of slavery within the Enlightenment tradition are overlooked as usual, but, more importantly, why did the Haitians find the language that was first articulated in Europe useful for their purposes? Does this suggest that Enlightenment ideals carry a genuinely universal resonance? Or that Smith was right to suggest that there is a form of liberty natural to the human species, which can be practically instantiated in a civil or commercial society? Since norms can only be realized through practice, could it not be that some people in non-Europe also found in the practices of bourgeois society a way to overcome the crises of their own societies?

These are huge questions, but they must be posed to make sense of the contradictions that riddle *Decolonizing Economics*. The cursory nod to universalism can only offer a genuine alternative if the *entire* history of modernity is not collapsed onto modes of thought and practice — such as the Eurocentrism of modernization theory — that emerged gradually, and as a function of past political failures. Had the authors taken the Enlightenment and Smith's contribution to it seriously, they may have recognized that the emphasis on reason was not meant as a valorization of "capitalist rationality," narrowly construed as profit-seeking (42). Rather, "reason" and "self-consciousness" were considered inseparable, and the aim was to become genuine *subjects* — that is, self-conscious agents — of historical change, instead of merely being *subjected* to it. If it is the authors' aim to make their readers more self-conscious about how economics as ideology shapes their lives, then they are also part of an Enlightenment tradition. Indeed, without the institutionalized existence of the "public use of reason," however sickly and embattled today, it is hard to imagine that their *ad hominem* critiques of "white men" would find an audience.[21]

Decolonizing Economics is motivated by dissatisfactions with life as it is presently lived. Addressing them requires conceptual frameworks and narratives that help us understand the present as historically constituted. But the book, however laudable its intentions, offers only vague generalities and a summary of ideas popular among the contemporary Left. It reproduces status-quoist affirmations of multiculturalism and identitarianism, never stopping to ask how "identities" emerge historically, and whether one-sided affirmations of ahistorically construed identities hinder the project of species-wide emancipation.[22] Given these shortcomings, we should summarily reject the authors' call to discard "canonical frameworks" (215). We risk discarding our best hope for interpreting and changing the world. **|P**

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[1] Cf. Luis Cortés, "Book Review: *Decolonizing Economics: An Introduction* by Devika Dutt, Carolina Alves, Surbhi Kesar, and Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven," *Capital and Class* 49, no. 4 (December 2025): 754–56.

[2] For a recent, effective articulation of this point, see Richard Bourke, "Provincializing Europe Revisited," *Global Intellectual History* (May 5, 2025), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23801883.2025.2497092>.

[3] I am not making any claims about whether most economists think in "Eurocentric" terms or not. The burden of proof is on the authors. But the claim that all limits of contemporary economic thought flow from Eurocentrism is not analytically convincing.

[4] See note below on Smith's language.

[5] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, book 3, ed. Edwin Cannan (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 401–45.

[6] Smith did use language that we would avoid today, such as "naked savages" when referring to societies in Africa. Nevertheless, Smith's explanations of the lack of "improvement" were always historical and geographical rather than cultural and static. See Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, book 1, 16, 21–25.

[7] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2, book 4: 103–58.

[8] James, M. Vaughn, *The Politics of Empire at the Accession of George III: The East India Company and the Crisis and Transformation of Britain's Imperial State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Spencer A. Leonard, "'The Capital Object of the Public': The 1766–7 Parliamentary Inquiry into the East India Company," *The English Historical Review* 132, no. 558 (2017): 1110–48; Spencer A. Leonard, "'A Theatre of Disputes': The East India Company Election of 1764 as the Founding of British India," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 4 (2014): 593–624; Sunit Singh, "Against a Mercatorial Sovereignty: The British Imperial State and the East India Company, 1783–1884," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2025), 1–47.

[9] Anirban Karak, "The politics of commerce in eighteenth-century Bengal: A reappraisal," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 61, no. 1 (January–March 2024): 33–66.

[10] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 153–57.

[11] Lest we forget, this point about Marx's equal contempt for European and non-European pre-bourgeois societies was first made in response to Said by the Syrian intellectual Sadik Jalal al-'Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse," *Khamsin: Journal of Revolutionary Socialists of the Middle East* 8 (1981): 5–26. Al-'Azm had initially submitted his review to the *Arab Studies Quarterly*, edited at the time by Said and Fouad Moughrabi. Al-'Azm and Said exchanged heated letters about the piece, following which their relationship deteriorated irretrievably. The

correspondence can be found at *Past and Future Present(s)*, <https://pastandfuturepresents.blogspot.com/2016/12/edward-saidsadik-al-azm-1980.html>.

[12] Karl Marx, "The Bourgeoisie and the Counter-Revolution I–IV," in *The Revolutions of 1848: Political Writings Volume 1*, ed. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 1973), 192–93.

[13] Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India" (1853), in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Colonialism: Articles from the New York Tribune and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 41.

[14] Aijaz Ahmad, "Marx on India: A Clarification," in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), 221–42, 228.

[15] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right': Introduction," in *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 138–39.

[16] See the essays in *Marxism and the Critique of Value*, eds. Neil Larsen, et al. (Chicago: M-C-M', 2004); and Anirban Karak, "Economic Theory without Historicity: The Relevance of Marxian Social Theory for a Critique of Capitalism," *Critical Historical Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 115–36.

[17] For an account of the near-perfect fit between decolonial theory and obscurantist nationalism in India, see Meera Nanda, *Postcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: The Wages of Unreason* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

[18] Gary Nigel Howe, "Dependency Theory, Imperialism, and the Production of Surplus Value on a World Scale," *Latin American Perspectives* 8, no. 3/4 (Late Summer – Autumn 1981): 82–102; Simon Clarke, "Class Struggle and Global Overaccumulation," in *Phases of Capitalist Development: Booms, Crises and Globalization*, eds. Makoto Itoh, et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 76–92; *The New International Division of Labor*, eds. Greig Charnock and Guido Starosta (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016); and Guido Starosta, Gastón Caligaris, and Alejandro Fitzsimons, *Value, Money and Capital: The Critique of Political Economy and Contemporary Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2024).

[19] Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). See also Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014).

[20] For a recent attempt, see Guido Starosta, *Marx's Capital, Method and Revolutionary Subjectivity* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[21] Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?,'" in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. S. Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet, second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 54–60.

[22] An early but still relevant critique of the overuse of "identity" in the social sciences is Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 1–47.

"Decolonization and the Left," continued from page 2

when the slaves claim them. Thomas Sankara said that the French Revolution showed us the idea of freedom, and the Bolshevik Revolution showed us the actuality; what he meant was that, therefore, he was going to get involved in the national struggle in Ghana.

When you turn the national struggle of European powers into the national struggle of postcolonial powers, a new chapter of freedom opens. Whereas it has become hackneyed in Italy, it got this magic new drama in that postcolonial struggle, which gave it a real meaning. The drama gets finished, you end up in South Africa now, and you think, "is this what we fought for?" Maybe not, but now you can confront the problems of your day because you made these struggles.

RL: Socialism is immanent to liberalism. It doesn't exist outside liberalism. Socialism exists because liberalism and bourgeois society overall came into their own self-contradiction within capitalism. Liberal society betrayed itself while socialists sought to apply the principles of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" to their logical conclusion.

James, you said that colonialism is over in the historic sense of the word, but doesn't it hurt to categorize decolonization as a historically bound understanding of colonialism, considering that so many of our lives are still governed by laws that were set in stone by colonial powers? The ideas that colonialism is a historically bound phenomenon and that decolonization is a historic movement are brainchildren of neoliberal and, ironically, neocolonial institutions who ask us to accept such understandings of colonialism. You said that we cannot address problems if we are stuck in colonialism, but why shouldn't we be stuck in colonialism when we still live in spaces based on the privileges of caste, class, race, and gender? Why shouldn't we demand answers to what was done to our people? If asking for acknowledgement of crimes committed against colonized and enslaved people is being stuck in colonialism, I know millions who would agree with being stuck in a colonial situation.

JH: The present makes the past more than the past that makes the present. There is not an atom of the British Empire left. We can choose to recreate patterns of oppression and exploitation, and we do. What you describe is that the modern world needs inequality; it is the foundation of profit and surplus value. It receives boundaries and structures from the past, but substantially they're made in the present. It is not as if the past is imposing upon us and making us do these things; it's much more that we, here in the present, are reinventing the past all the time to dominate us. That's what we should undo.

I'm not saying there isn't injustice, class society, or great inequality between national powers. I spend a lot of time writing about these things. You say that these laws are "set in stone" — literally, they are not. The nature of laws is that they might be inscribed in stone, but they are not made in stone; they are made of human relations. Different parts of the former British Empire may have oppressive laws on sexuality or on property; those things exist now. The people in those countries that let them exist are not Britain. It's not Britain that makes all their oppressive laws. In fact, the British Foreign Office is sneakily telling people not to go to Saudi Arabia because they have very backward laws — forget that we put them there — which is obviously dishonest. But you can't say that Britain is the country that's making Saudi Arabia have those oppressive laws; Saudi Arabia is the country making it have oppressive laws. Until the Saudis confront the elites there, those laws aren't going to change. But what would it mean for Britain to make prospects of democratizing those countries? It has to be addressed within those countries themselves.

We're selling them arms.

JH: Yes, and that's despicable. I'm not against stopping that.

What is the issue the Left is encountering to transform society to something new, something more equitable, towards new possibilities of freedom? Is capitalism a colonial problem or is colonization a capitalism problem? Ralph said the way that the Left uses decolonization as a politics is a result of the failure of the movements for self-determination, which is itself a failure of the earlier socialist and communist revolutions in the early 20th century. The horizon of politics is capitalism, which is an international problem, and there is a failure to address that problem, so it turns into something else. James said something similar — did anyone think that the end of colonialism would mean the end of capitalism or oppression? Maybe Andrew would say that an orthodox Marxist or socialist would have to defend the universalism and modernity of liberalism and bourgeois society, while the issue of decolonization addresses that directly — the term of work for modern society is white supremacy, and that's the politics the Left would have to address. Is capitalism or coloniality the deeper problem? Either can be a distraction from each other.

AS: For the types of colonial projects we are discussing, colonization is essentially a problem of capitalism. You can't understand these colonial projects without the economic motivations that go into the slave trade and cash crops. For the sake of brevity and clarity I have focused on European colonial projects that collapsed in the mid-20th century, but the Spanish and Portuguese empire-building in the early years was governed by a spirit of political aggrandizing and economic self-interest. They weren't strictly capitalist in the first generations. You can say similar things for the Ottoman Empire and the Japanese Empire. It's largely capitalist, but not always.

JH: The trouble with talking about capitalism is that it's a thin conceptual thing that is hard to get your teeth into it. We should reflect on why the colonial struggle has become so emblematic, especially since this historical moment is over. I'm bemused that we are trying to understand modern and contemporary conflicts through the criticism of this mid-century subterranean war, but it somehow has moral weight. When I was growing up, it was the worker's struggle that's essentially socialism, which was a limited point of view, but that was how we talked: everything was class struggle. Now everything is coloniality. I think we are embarrassed about pressing our own claims in Britain, and the topic of coloniality just has more authority, which has always been the case. The Marxist category of wage slavery exists because the Chartists struggled with the Anti-Slavery Society for the attention of the Victorian era, and they used to say in meetings that they didn't just want to fight against slavery but also against wage slavery in Britain. 19th-century proto-socialists were trying to make their problem alive for people who were attentive to the suffering of slaves in the West Indies but indifferent to the suffering of the wage slaves of Yorkshire. Even as I'm saying it, it sounds priggish and weird.

In cinema, drama, and fiction, you can quickly pick out who the bad guys and good guys are. The bad guys are the racists with Ku Klux Klan hats, and when we see the poor suffering peasants in the fields, we know that they are the good guys. That's the moral framework that we rest on. Anti-colonialism seems to speak to goodness and freedom, while the workers' struggle looks vaguely racist, aggressive, and skinhead-y.

RL: I'll say that the problem is capitalism. Capitalism is an expression of the crisis in the modern project of freedom, which is what the advent of bourgeois society was meant to be, that the freedom of each would be the precondition of the freedom of all and that everyone would be free and equal, and there would an expression of brotherhood between humanity. Yet that doesn't fully materialize. When you address the problem of capitalism — and this is my gripe with decolonial theory — it is prone to attacking capitalism from a particularist standpoint when capitalism is a universal social form. You have to find a way to address it as a broader, international, universal social form. You can't do it in a particularist, sectarian, or even national frame. It's easy to say and harder to actualize.

We are in the UK, but the discussion is a little UK-centered with talk of the British Empire and its former colonies. I was happy when Ralph mentioned Kurdistan as an example of an ongoing straightforward colonization. It seems that we are saying that colonization, anti-colonizing movements, and Marxism are things of the past, and all we have today are the curricula. Andrew mentioned the Occupy movement as a fresh energy and BLM as developing critical thought on the present. Why are contemporary decolonizing movements and their political theorists still doing old-fashioned decolonizing struggles but haven't considered present observations of political and economic relations? Why not think about the contemporaries? After the 2000s, there has been the new paradigm of the previously Marxist-Leninist Kurdish movement. Abdullah Öcalan, the ideological leader of the Kurdistan freedom movement, discusses the notion of capitalist modernity versus democratic modernity, which is what we're supposed to strive for together. It is transnational at the same time as a national liberal struggle. Also, the Left wouldn't agree with Andrew when he says that history is a burden or obstacle to a fresh movement. People can always learn from history through critiquing it rather than just forgetting it.

AS: Yes, why not think about the armed struggles of the present? That is consistent with my argument, which is that we shouldn't primarily focus on things like the armed struggles of the past, and armed struggles aren't a thing of the past. There are huge sums of people engaged in armed struggles around the world; they take it seriously and believe in their struggle towards something better. My engagement has been with particular types of Leftist politics. I have spent a hell of a lot of time engaging with the history of the armed struggles of the past and learning about exactly the kind of thing you just asked me.

RL: The question reminded me of another example of the anti-colonial struggles of the present, which is Western Sahara and Morocco. The Polisario Front[18] is of the same kidney as some of the Kurdish groups: former Marxist-Leninists mixed with nationalism. It's an example that doesn't get talked about much because most people don't find that attractive to engage with, compared to, say, Israel–Palestine.

JH: It was a depressing moment just after the election in Turkey — the disaster that the opposition made of it — and we're stuck with that regime. For years I resisted the idea of the axis of evil, but there plainly is an alliance between Putin and Erdoğan, which maybe also includes India. We have to get used to the fact that there is a reactionary power in the world which is not entirely derived from the West. Do we have the critical tools to address this emerging reaction? I hope you are right, because I can only see the strength of the reaction, not the opposition.

Do we need Leftism to motivate decolonization? Isn't liberalism enough? Is the Leftist position on colonialism the same as the liberal position? Liberalism and Marxism consider some forms of colonialism as progressive and other forms as regressive. What did it mean for Marx, Adam Smith, and Kautsky to say that the colonization of North America was progressive? Is a progressive form of colonialism still conceivable? If not, does it mean that liberalism as well as Marxism is obsolete, at least for these reasons?

JH: Colonialism always has a progressive aspect. Capitalism has a progressive aspect. You are not separating the world into evil and good. All of Britain is capitalist: the workers are capitalist, and the capitalists are capitalist. It's a capitalist social system. What is good is going to come from within. British people can see through it, transcend it, and go beyond it. Colonialism was massively destructive, but it destroyed all kinds of fixed societies where there were no paths out. Colonialism created different paths out.

The decolonization movement is the progressive side of colonialism. In Nkrumah's books about the history of the revolution in Ghana,[19] he talks about the ways that the urbanization of the working class was definitive in the trajectory of the movement. Sometimes he is a bit optimistic, but nonetheless he's talking about a real thing. He says that colonialism organizes us against colonialism, in the same way that Karl Marx talks about capitalism's tendency to organize the working people against capitalism. It provokes a reaction. That may sound like saying, "punish us so we can fight back," but this is how history works. It isn't like the good people are over here and the bad people are over there. It's the interaction and conflict that generate the next stage out.

AS: The idea of something being progressive is not a value judgement over whether or not something is good; it's about the things motivating the projects and understanding the ability to make change through time. Depending on your taste and politics, you can regard the Soviet Union as a project of imperial colonialism that regarded itself as progressive.

In terms of whether or not you need decolonization to make socialism: you cannot establish any true socialism without first substantively achieving decolonization. But that doesn't mean that decolonization automatically turns into socialism. We had a great paper in Cambridge a few weeks ago about how the language of decolonization is being effectively co-opted by far-Right Hindu nationalism.[20]

RL: History is a tragedy, not a morality tale. That's the first lesson you learn if you study history. But historically, colonialism, or the colonization of North America that you referred to, was progressive in that it helped ascertain the basis of the world market and cosmopolitan commercial society, which in turn produced its own gravediggers, the working class. It makes dialectical sense. That's how Marxism believes colonialism was progressive. Would you say that this mature capitalist world is a form of progressive colonialism? There are Maoists who would say that China's rule in Tibet is a form of progressive colonialism because it overthrows the Dalai Lama and the Buddhist caste system, but we'll see about that. Imperialism has placed a task upon us, which is that of socialism, i.e., trying to overcome the contradictions of capitalism. Until we at least try to do it, who knows?

How does your Leftist politics impact your teaching? What does decolonizing the curriculum mean? This usually means that a reading list with a black academic or somebody indigenous is presented, everyone shows up to a seminar, and no one says anything. What should the students coming out of these classes look like, how should they talk, and what should they do?

AS: The students should think, be, and do exactly what they want to. If you teach, you should give people the tools to do their own thinking. The things that the next generation of people come up with should be better than what we came up with. Having said that, writing the curriculum is a project of power — not just with regard to coloniality — because the teacher is supposed to be qualified. When I write the curriculum, I think about how the students engaged with it last year, things they understood or didn't, things that are problematic, and I design the new year accordingly. I try to identify latent assumptions about our core questions and ways of thinking and I try to interrogate them and get myself outside of the box. That's the substantive side where decolonization comes into teaching.

These are matters of personal feelings and taste. I've given you my hackneyed and slightly embarrassing narrative about the SWP and revolutionary socialism, but I strongly believe that a lecture or a seminar is not a missionary event. My job is not to convince people in the room that revolutionary socialism is right. If that were my job, I'd be doing something else. My job is to show people ideas about the world that they can use to understand it better on their own. Any student is free to have any political opinion about the world as long as they can show how they arrived at that opinion and defend it with reference to empirical cases and sound intellectual processes. Teaching is ideally not proselytizing, but it's hard for me to sustain that idealistic position on this panel.

JS: The choice of subject is important but not that important. In essence, all roads lead to Rome. The more you study human history, drama, or tragedy, the more you get out of it. I'm glad that Britain is at last more attentive to the fact that there is a world and other people. It's been a long time coming. Writing the curriculum may look tokenistic, but we're idiots; what do you expect? It takes a long time to get it right. A good teacher, if they think you're going somewhere, will listen and be interested and encouraging. A bad teacher will say, "don't do that." I'm probably a terrible teacher.

I never teach what I think because if I did, my students would all hate me forever. I try to teach what the established view is. The established view now is more decolonized than it used to be, so I'll teach that because I have a responsibility to present not myself, not a biography, but to put all of the culture, as much as I have access to, in front of anybody who is willing to pay attention. That is an important responsibility, and we should take it seriously. Occasionally you can be prescriptive because you can't study everything all at once, but the best teachers know that there are many paths to understanding.

RL: I'm not a teacher, and I'm not sure if I'd be good at it. I agree that the object of education should be to teach people how to think, not what to think. As for the curriculum, in an ideal world, it would try to tell the story of humanity and how it developed. We can bring out all the accumulated cultural patrimony of humanity, whether in China, India, Western Europe, etc. You try to eke out universal themes that could bind people into a common conversation across ages, beyond arbitrary social divisions we live in, and through that we can engage, critique, and arrive at a better, more holistic, more understanding enlightenment, what the Greeks called paideia — deep education. **|P**

Transcribed by Ceci Chang and Cristian Martinez Vega

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[1] James Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1837–1909* (London: Hurst, 2011); James Heartfield, *Britain's Empires: A History, 1600–2020* (London: Anthem Press, 2022).

[2] Andrew Sanchez, *Criminal Capital: Violence, Corruption and Class in Industrial India* (New Delhi: Routledge India, 2017).

[3] Video available at <https://youtu.be/BfScpu06K_o>.

[4] Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution of Ireland were revised via the 19th Amendment in 1999.

[5] Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1965).

[6] [German] Conception of the world, worldview, etc.

[7] Made up of bronze, brass, wood, ivory, and other materials, the Benin Bronzes are a group of thousands of plaques and sculptures that once adorned the palace of the Kingdom of Benin, in what is now Nigeria. They were mostly taken by British forces during the Benin Expedition of 1897, and they are now in the collections of museums around the world.

[8] [Latin] Mode of living, way of life, etc.

[9] Olúf mi O. Táíwò, *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

[10] Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 237.

[11] C.L.R. James, "The Making of the Caribbean People," in *Spheres of Existence: Selected Writings* (London: Alison and Busby, 1980), 179.

[12] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 201, 205.

[13] Johann von Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1 (1808), 1.3.1340.

[14] [Irish] Our day will come. It is a slogan of Irish republicanism that was coined in the 1970s during the Troubles.

[15] Leszek Kołakowski, "The Concept of the Left," in *The New Left Reader*, ed. Carl Oglesby (New York: Grove Press, 1969), 156.

[16] A conflict in Fiji in 1886 involving British colonists, native Fijian groups, and the Kai Colo. *Kai Colo* is Fijian for "from the hills," i.e., the inhabitants of the highlands of Viti Levu, who were opposed to the teachings of Christian missionaries, etc.

[17] Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front, the ruling party of Zimbabwe since independence in 1980.

[18] Also known as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro, which is a Sahrawi nationalist liberation movement, founded in 1973, seeking to end the occupation of Western Sahara through armed resistance and political advocacy. It has opposed Spanish colonialism, Mauritanian irredentism, and Moroccan irredentism.

[19] See Kwame Nkrumah, *Dark Days in Ghana* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1968).

[20] See, for example, Annapurna Menon, "Debunking Hindutva Appropriation of Decolonial Thought," *Interfere: Journal for Critical Thought and Radical Politics* 3 (2022): 36–57; Ratna Kapur, "Race-making, religion and rights in the post-colony: unmasking the pathogen in assembling a Hindu nation," *International Journal of Law in Context* 18, no. 4 (December 2022): 499–516; Alexandra Lewis and Marie Lall, "From decolonisation to authoritarianism: the co-option of the decolonial agenda in higher education by right-wing nationalist elites in Russia and India," *Higher Education* 87 (2024): 1471–88; and Meera Nanda, P*ostcolonial Theory and the Making of Hindu Nationalism: The Wages of Unreason* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

But by now you can say that anti-colonialism — here I disagree with Andrew — was a massive success. The colonies are gone, the flags are down, the armies have left for the most part, the countries are independent. There is a misunderstanding: did anybody think that the end of colonialism would mean the end of capitalism and oppression? No, they just meant that the British, French, or Dutch would be out and that the people would be in a position to address their own problems. Now, if you live in India or Nigeria, you have to say that decolonization is the most amazing success story. Nearly half the people on the planet now live in places where they have freed themselves from colonial rule. And to dismiss that, to not understand that life they have made, to say that they are unfree and not responsible, is debilitating. I have no big idea of what confronts people in Jamaica or Ireland; I have no good advice because they are not my problems but their problems. That's what it means to be independent. Colonialism is over.

There is something weird about prefacing our contemporary discussions about statues, books, and histories with decolonization. Sure, let's have a conversation about whether these statues should be up or what books should be read, but let's not call that decolonization. Decolonization was a war; it was a massive social conflict, and it is trivializing to say that the conversations we're having about the curricula is somehow an extension of the decolonization struggle. They are interesting academic discussions but they're not decolonization struggles; that is verging on childish.

The works of postcolonial literature by Robbie Shilliam or Homi Bhabha are not about the developed world and its particular problems; they are a species of postmodern philosophy. That's the actual wellsprings of decolonial literature, mostly an extension of Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. I was there, by the way; when people like Shilliam or Bhabha were in college and reading those things people started to tap them on the shoulders and say, "you stuck up twats. Talking about Jean-François Lyotard is so embarrassing." They used to call them the theory boys. It was kind of embarrassing, all this intense activity. They try to dress this up in drag and attach this to some kind of big social struggle to make it sound grand and less ridiculous. Happily, Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak were there as a crossover point, and they lent this postmodern deconstruction of the grand narrative the clothes of a social struggle. They said they're not just messing about with a critique of rationality but doing real work, an extension of the work that Nkrumah and Frantz Fanon did. "Just as your comrades were fighting the British Empire back then, we're fighting against the British Empire in the library. We're going to take over the oppressive power of Western rationality. Not Western machine guns or Western tanks, but the oppressive power of Descartes." This is completely useless to anybody in the developing world or the developed world. It is a box-standard, end-of-the-20th-century, end-of-history social philosophy masquerading as decolonization.

Ralph Leonard: The idea of decolonization has become a fad in Western discourse in the past decade, especially since 2020, when protestors in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in the U.S. believed that taking down statues was a radical act of decolonization, and that finally, in this moment, the occident would face a reckoning with its century-long history of violence and colonialism against subaltern people. Of course, decolonization once denoted the political movement for national liberation that engulfed Africa and Asia in the mid-20th century, demanding national independence from European tutelage, where the nation-state model would be truly universalized across the world in place of the world of empires that preceded it. In the 21st century, however, decolonization increasingly denotes a primarily academic and cultural tendency influenced by the decolonial turn, promoted by thinkers such as Walter Mignolo and Ramón Grosfoguel, which takes aim at the supposed universality of Western knowledge and how it's an instrument of the colonial matrix of power. The dependency theorists of the 1960s wanted the Third World to delink economically and politically from the global system; likewise, the decolonizers of today seek for marginalized groups to delink intellectually and epistemically from the Western tradition that has been vaunted for too long.

In essence, according to decolonial theory, the completion of the struggle against Western imperialism necessitates a rejection of the Western *Weltanschauung*[6] due to its supposedly inherent coloniality. Hence, decolonize the curriculum, decolonize the museum by returning the Benin Bronzes.[7] As with any zany cultural radicalism, an entire cottage industry is created around it where anything and everything must be decolonized. It's symptomatic of how easily capitalist culture can assimilate ostensibly anti-capitalist means into its *modus vivendi*.[8] Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò, a Nigerian academic, in his cogent critique of decolonial theory against decolonization,[9] decried it as harming scholarship in Africa but also for its full embrace of the racialization of consciousness, as if modernity was in some intrinsic way anti-black, a position that relegates Africans to merely being the victims or resistors of modernity rather than agents within it or appropriators of it. In Táíwò's words, it turns Africans into permanent subalterns within their own history. Decolonial theory presumes that "people of color," or the colonized, have no connection with Western universality, that to be properly radical is to be disenchanted with all that is designated as Western, that they could only justify themselves or critique capitalism from the basis of a pre-modern or pre-capitalist, localized, autochthonous identity's standpoint, whose thought must be purified of Western influence lest they remain subservient and thus alienated from themselves.

In contrast to this decolonial particularism, consider the universality of Frantz Fanon, often abused by decolonizers of today, who said in *Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that "All elements for a solution to the major problems of humanity existed at at one time or another in European thought";[10] or C. L. R. James, who said that "I denounce European colonialism. But I respect the learning and profound discoveries of Western civilisation."[11] Both of these statements could be lambasted as Eurocentric, but that would be to misunderstand them. They were not pious to the intrinsic greatness of Europe; rather, it was a recognition of a universal social form that happened to fertilize in Europe from the Renaissance onwards and spread outwards throughout the world. What we now call bourgeois society has surpassed all previous social formations, and within it held the keys to the universal emancipation of humanity. Their commitment to world revolution, as opposed to the mere decolonization of the mind, was rooted in the unequivocal observation that the basis of international socialism lay in what Marx had once designated the civilizing effect of capital, its drive to universality beyond national borders through trade and the world market, the antagonistic cooperation of nations of peoples, through immigration and the international division of labor. This form of communism may seem passé to the theoreticians of decoloniality, but its historical program was far more profound and radical, precluding any talk of return to culture, repatriation, or strategic essentialism. Race, like the nation and patriarchy, will be thrown to the rubbish bin of history once and for all, realizing the potential immanent within bourgeois society of a world without races and fatherlands, where the accumulated cultural patrimony of civilization will belong to all without the need for a claim of exclusive ownership through ancestry.

Let me quote a passage from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) that exemplifies this radical universalism. You could call this true decolonization when he says,

> I am a man, and I have to rework the world's past from the very beginning. I am not just responsible for the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. Every time a man has brought victory to the dignity of the spirit, every time a man has said no to an attempt to enslave his fellow man, I have felt a sense of solidarity with his act. In no way does my basic vocation have to be drawn from the past of peoples of color. . . . I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors. For many black intellectuals European culture has a characteristic of exteriority. Furthermore, in human relationships, the western world can feel foreign to the black man. Not wanting to be thought of as a poor relation, an adopted son, or a bastard child, will he feverishly try to discover a black civilization? Above all, let there be no misunderstanding. We are convinced that it would be of enormous interest to discover a black literature or architecture from the third century before Christ. We would be overjoyed to learn of the existence of a correspondence between some black philosopher and Plato. But we can absolutely not see how this fact would change the lives of eight-year-old kids working in the cane fields of Martinique or Guadeloupe.[12]

The prevalence of decolonial theory clearly stems from the failures of the national liberation movements, where the nation-state model became not an avenue of liberation and autonomy but an avenue of oppression and reproduced more divisions, whether ethnic or sectarian; and in turn these historical failures came from the defeat of socialism, which I present as this progressive, futuristic, internationalist movement to overcome capitalist imperialism. Because movements have failed to defeat the West politically, it's now believed that one can defeat Western imperialism in the realm of thought and epistemology. This is folly — vulgar idealism and just reactionary. If socialism or any movement to overcome the contradictions of capital are to be revived as a real movement of history, it won't be served well by decolonial theory. You can't critique capitalism from some indigenous or pre-capitalist identity; it will come from the negation of these things. To quote the famous words of Goethe's *Faust*, "all that exists deserves to perish."[13]

Responses

AS: Contemporary decolonization, as a political project, can be co-opted in performative ways; it can become a fad and turn intellectualist without any clear application. That doesn't mean the essential terms of the project are wrong. Ralph is probably raising these issues to the wrong person because I am an anthropologist and a professional academic, which means I assume that culture and ideas matter. I'm in good company with most radical thinkers and vanguard socialists in believing that cultural ideas are important in establishing the conditions for radical struggle, including the types of struggles used now, like going out into the street with guns and machetes.

As for whether this project is simply about removing good thought from the world — no, it isn't. I'm certain there are people who approach decolonizing the curriculum simplistically, as if it's just about taking a few things off the reading list. When I use terms like that, I'm simply saying that I want to create space in my students' heads for a wider range of things we've never thought of before. Thinking about things helps you imagine how to make things better. The distinction between the material and the ideological is itself an ideology.

In terms of whether colonialism is done and dusted — no, it isn't. In a strict, formal sense, we can date the dismantling of colonial states to specific moments. But if what we call coloniality is no longer real, we wouldn't be able to see that the majority of postcolonial states are made up of people whose lives are shorter and sicker than my life. Those facts slap us in the face every day.

Acknowledging these facts isn't about dismissing the efforts, struggles, and victories of the anti-colonial movement. I have absolute respect for those movements, and they were effective in some ways, but I can't just say, "it's done." If it were done, the world would not be so absolutely, disgracefully, unjustly unequal. And it is not incidental that this inequality still runs along the same lines as colonizer and colonized.

JS: Yes, absolutely, ideas matter. My daughter just went through her degree in English literature, and I love all the tweaking that goes on. There is only so much room in the curriculum, but broadening it is a great thing. We should enjoy the riches of human culture and civilization. English literature is just a tiny part of that.

I believe in real struggle, and I believe in ideas, but I was trying to illustrate their difference. I am not saying that reassessing history, literature, or culture isn't important, but the real succession of national struggles for independence was of a different order. We are in a different moment. Maybe we have grown up; maybe our civilization is becoming more intelligent, less prickly and defensive, more able to absorb, react, and respond. We can hear the crass things we used to say and flinch away. But, of course, people in the future will laugh at us and mock many of our judgments. They'll view with contempt things we feel absolutely certain about today. It is already happening to us now.

Andrew ended on a good point about inequality. It reminded me of Samir Amin's dependency theory. They used to publish a book every year saying that capitalism was never going to take off in Korea. They were wrong, but I understood that they were saying that the coordinates of the past — the dominant West and the subordinate East and South — were being reproduced. In a broad sense, they were right; that's how capitalism works. People with the money tend to get more money, and people without the money tend to get less.

But dependency theory and the underdevelopment thesis don't understand that the world is dramatically dynamic. At the end of communism, many of us thought that China would become a colony again. Now we look back and realize we were wrong. China's development is extraordinary. Lots of people hate to hear that, but I think it's fabulous. I've been reading about China's development projects in Laos. The West destroyed Laos; it was the most bombed place in the entire world; and now, even though it might seem mundane to build roads and railways, that is human civilization. Of course, I hate that politics in China is controlled and restricted, but it's also a center of human ingenuity that will dominate the 21st century. We all ought to be thinking about these things. Europe definitely was the monster of the 19th century, but it's now a ramshackle place. They keep saying that there is no war in Europe, but there is. They might say that's not really Europe or that Eastern Europe doesn't count, but there's always a war.

Honestly, I love America. So many superb things come out of America. Lots of horrible things come out of America, but so does much cultural influence. It is 300 million people thinking, working, creating — and yes, doing terrible things to each other and everyone else. But maybe America has not been broken by the century. You can see its dynamism when you look at the West Coast.

I never thought that the end of colonialism would mean the end of inequality. Rhetorically, I want to say that these countries remain dominated by capital, but you can't properly address the weaknesses of the elites in Nigeria or South Africa today if you are still stuck in that colonial rhetoric. When I meet people who are sharp and radical in their parts of the world, they are bored and repressed. I've met lots of Irish people who say to me, "*Tiocfaidh ár lá*."[14] They feel constrained by republicanism. It was a dead end. It was a tremendously important contribution to history, but it is not where the future is coming from.

RL: For the question of whether colonialism still exists in our world today — I remember that one of the issues that first made me politically conscious was the question of Palestine. Engaging with that issue often raises this debate: is it an issue of settler colonialism? Zionism is often interpreted as a settler-colonial project in the Middle East, and yet Zionists describe themselves as a national liberation project. It is both a project of national liberation and nation-building, but the result of that nation-building was a settler-colonial project that extirpated the Palestinian Arabs.

Another point about the colonial issue is that if you engage with something like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, you'll see that many Ukrainian intellectuals and even the Ukrainian public often frame their rhetoric in terms of decolonization. Russia's actions — like imposing the Russian language, erasing Ukrainian cultural artefacts, kidnapping Ukrainian children to assimilate them, and committing massacres — echo past atrocities. It's reminiscent of what happened in Canada with indigenous children, or what the Nazis did to Polish children — kidnapping them and trying to make them German. You do find parallels, but overall, if we're talking about capitalism today, the colonial frame is not the best way to understand capitalism in its totality — maybe a fragment.

Q&A

In 1848, the springtime of the peoples, Europe was in a struggle for national independence. The nation was conceived as a sovereign people that have the right to establish their own laws and reestablish civil society, which was juxtaposed to the traditional feudal elites. The nation was a new bourgeois concept. But those nation-states came into conflict with one another again , which gave rise to petty, conservative, reactionary nationalism as each nation-state sought to find its way within the wider capitalist system. The way you talk about the decolonial struggle in the 20th century makes me wonder, aren't we naturalizing the nation-state framework? Is the Nigerian, Rwandan, or Dominican state the same kind of sovereign that is speaking for the people, or are we missing the wider international context and struggle? Does the state and its elites stand for its people at large? My second point is that the Left should be outraged at the caste system in India. It points to a wider impotence of the Left. In the words of Kołakowski, "'Bleeding-heartism' is not a political position."[15] What does it mean for the Left to be outraged? What kind of political position could emerge out of outrage at the caste system in India or at racial discrimination in the U.S.?

AS: Outrage on its own is not productive politics; it is performative and destructive. But outrage against injustice can be the most important initial steps. The BLM movement organized around outrage, and it's a movement — I may be naïvely hopeful here — that can have an impact on how policing is done.

The nation-state is a reductive and limiting concept. The world is more complex than nations and nation-states. There is also the interesting tension that nationalism is important to anti-colonial struggles. Partha Chatterjee has written about this. The idea that there are national identities in places like India, Jamaica, Nigeria, etc. was a motivating principle that people organized around.

JH: People often try to think beyond the nation-state, but somehow it keeps coming back. Even in the language of internationalism, you meet nationalism. Internationalism doesn't abolish nationalism; internationalism means solidarity with people in other places and fighting for their freedom. It means acknowledging the national rights of the Irish and of black South Africans.

The Bolshevik kind of internationalism never worked. Between 1917 and 23, guys used to go about in leather jackets and bald heads, really believing that they were the partisans of the future, that they were going to leave the nation-state behind. I have more respect for Hannah Arendt's view that world government is a nonsensical position. Our world government is so vast that no person can ever control it. Here I disagree with the Platypus view — you can't escape the fact that political powers have a national form. If you want political authority, you have to address the national form that authority is distributed within.

RL: This is the paradox of nationalism. At least in its origin with the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, nationalism had a progressive, unifying power because it originally meant unifying different peoples, principalities, and provinces in the service of a common political project or vision. That was also the dream of the anti-colonial movement. In Nigeria, you wouldn't be Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa, but Nigerian: citizens of a common republic. Unfortunately, in the colonial world, even that slightly utopian vision of nationalism has gone away. It is now seen as a social Darwinist struggle between ethnic groups: my tribe versus your tribe. Compared to that identity politics, the nation seems progressive. The nation did serve a necessary stage in human development, but it is not the end point. The problem is how to transcend the nation. My guess is as good as yours; it's a difficult subject to broach.

As Andrew noted, there are still manifest inequalities and injustices aligned with former colonies and colonizers, and in the relations of domination between the global North and South. For me to be convinced that decolonization is over, I'd like to hear more about how we look at these injustices and inequalities. What is productive about throwing out the concepts of decolonization? What are they stopping us from seeing? What can we see more clearly once we stop fussing over decolonization?

JH: It was always understood within the anti-colonial struggle that the great advantage of getting the occupying nation off your back is that you would be in a better position to see the inequalities within your own society. And it was always the case that colonial authorities didn't rule directly — it was never like "Britain rules India." That was true at its absolute political apex, but most Indians never met a white person. For 300 years of Britain in India, it was the local elites that Britain encouraged, fostered, and negotiated with. I spent some time in Fiji talking about the Little War,[16] and I was corrected intelligently by the Fijian chief, who said, "you think it was Governor Arthur Gordon who organized this war against the upland Fijians, but that was us. We fought the war against the Hill Folk, and we got the British to give us guns." It was a great correction because I, with my postcolonial glasses, could only see the European angle, and he was saying, "we had ambitions and wanted to modernize, to make them go to church like us and be civilized." Fiji has struggled to cope with how to get out of their colonial setup, which manifests in a fractious racial divide between Indo-Fijians and Fijians. But the way to get out, as people have found again and again, is to start thinking Fijian. Stop thinking, "we've been hard done by," and start thinking, "we are defeating each other and need to sort this out."

It is indeed intellectually and morally debilitating to refer back. The way that ZANU–PF[17] constantly arrested social development within Zimbabwe was destructive, because it used the prism of colonial-era struggle.

RL: We also have to be careful not to validate colonial propaganda too much and give the white man the power of God, as if he has complete agency and others don't. Especially now in the postcolonial era, people within these nations and societies do have agency. They have the potential to change their own conditions, and any radical project, however conceived, must make people realize that they have this power and help them exercise it for their own benefit.

I want to return to the concept of decolonization affirming the idea of the nation-state. If the Left is a movement to affirm bourgeois rights and ideals of all people equally, what separates the Left from liberalism? If the Left is focused on the transformation of society and achieving socialism, why should the Left care about decolonization beyond transforming it into the movement for socialism?

AS: I don't mind if aspects of socialism sound like liberalism. For a long time, I thought about political life as picking a side, getting sucked in, and fighting to the death. I don't think that anymore. Socialism has aspects that are about striving for rights and justice — that's part of liberalism too. That doesn't negate socialism, nor does it rehabilitate liberalism. These things are not cults; they are a series of ideas about the world that supposedly gives us useful tools for understanding it, and if you understand it well enough you can do something.

JH: I agree. Rights are turned on their head every time you change the parameter of who has rights. You can read the poems of John Wilmot Rochester or the libertine Marquis de Sade and glory in that obscene freedom they asserted, but you're always kind of upset that it involves spanking other people who didn't get a choice, lots of sybaritic pleasures at the expense of everybody else. You can love Aristotle and Plato, but it also irks you that they lived at the expense of slaves. But those rights are transformed

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